

Often people have good ideas, but they don't know how to convince others of their value. The way ideas are introduced can influence whether others develop enthusiasm for them. Whether it's a new opinion, a position, a concept, a program or action that you would like the church to consider, your chances of having it accepted by others will be improved if you have a plan for introducing your idea.

## History and Background

The biblical tradition is filled with people of vision who tried to convince others of their ideas. Abraham and Moses had visions that they imposed on their followers with various degrees of success. Noah was convinced that the flood was coming, but he didn't have much success in convincing anyone in the community. The prophets' voices introduced radical ideas that called upon people to change their ways. Jesus' new ideas were often introduced in parables that called upon hearers to draw their own conclusions.

Ideas that are now accepted as the church's tradition were radical when they were introduced. Now the church may be bound by that rich tradition and it becomes difficult to introduce new ideas. Imposing ideas doesn't work very well in our society, which values democratic processes. Even more, in a congregation, new ideas will not bring transformation without

community acceptance. That's not always easy because there is momentum for things to continue as they are.

## Common Practices

Because the Holy Spirit moves through us all, we all can be open to new ideas, but some people seem to introduce ideas more often or more effectively than others. In most churches a few people introduce ideas. Generally they are people in positions of authority. In order to let others introduce ideas, some churches have retreats or conversations in homes or planning sessions where as many members as possible express their ideas for the church in a setting where they can feel comfortable and be taken seriously.

Most people operate on the motto: "If it isn't broken, don't fix it." Ideas are introduced because someone thinks something can be improved. Ideas have a better chance of adoption if they suggest a way to "fix" something that other people agree is "broken". Even then, you may hear "But we've always done it that way."

## How to Introduce an Idea

- Decide from the outset your real purpose in presenting an idea. It should not be to make a hit or make you look good. Elijah didn't burn up the altars for applause, but to demonstrate the power of God over

the likes of Baal. Your idea should be consistent with the mission of the church or group in which you propose it.

- Understand the people to whom the idea will be offered. Who will be there? What are they like? What do they like? What will they likely ask?
- Understand history that may affect the response to your idea. If a beloved former pastor taught church members that Tenebrae was the proper service for Maundy Thursday, that will affect acceptance of your idea for a community meal with conversations about "what communion means to me."
- Make decisions about the timing. This includes introducing it far enough in advance of the implementation date. It also means taking into consideration events and feelings in the group. If you want the men's organization to sponsor a refugee family, it would be to your advantage to propose it when the treasurer has reported a substantial bank account, not a deficit. Even if the potential for support were there, it would be more difficult for people to get excited about it then.
- Test your idea with several competent friends and critics who can help you evaluate it. Don't seek only those people you know will agree with and support you. Seek those you know are thoughtful, objective and experienced in the area of your idea.

- Informally share it with key decision-makers who will help determine whether and how your idea will be adopted.
- Put your idea in writing, incorporating the insights gained from others. If your idea has to do with changing attitudes or actions of others, answer each of these questions:
  - What will this idea do?
  - How will it be done?
  - Who will do it?
  - Where will it be done?
  - When will it be done?
  - How much will it cost?
  - How will it be paid for?
- Enlist those willing to join you in presenting the idea and in investing time and talent and energy in its implementation. Try to get specific commitments and pledges. Incorporate these into your presentation, but take care not to give the impression you have been "lobbying" to shore up support in opposition to others' views. Such an approach can create conflict and division if not done with care. In presenting your idea to a group or individual, you may decide that you are not the best person to make the presentation. If others share your commitment, it may be that one of them feels more comfortable or is in a position to better present the idea. Decide who will do it. During the presentation:
  - State clearly the situation that led to your idea. Get the facts straight. Dramatize it with pictures, data and testimony of other people.

- State your idea clearly and factually.
  - Be properly enthusiastic.
  - Use a variety of appropriate techniques in the presentation.
  - State several options you've considered and why yours seems to be the best. For example, to deal with the world refugee crisis, you could propose that the group sponsor a refugee family, support another church in its sponsorship or give a special contribution to One Great Hour of Sharing or an additional gift to Church World Service.
  - Acknowledge the other options and tell why you are making your proposal for sponsorship.
  - Identify the specific rewards or positive factors that you believe the acceptance of your option would bring.
  - Tell of commitments you have already received for your idea. Be careful not to appear to be pushing the idea through and to have proceeded before having authority. It's fine to tell that a state coordinator for refugees is willing to meet with the group to help them understand what is involved; it's something else to announce a time and place that the ecumenical committee's interpreter will join you at the airport to meet the refugee family.
  - Allow time for discussion and consideration. Depending upon the importance of the idea, the amount of support it will take and the amount of change from the routine, this may take more than one session.
  - Secure a commitment to the idea. Get a vote or formal consensus.
  - Have a plan of support and follow-up accepted by the group.
  - Stay with it until it is fully implemented.
  - Find ways to evaluate the implementation of the idea. Build into your plan the means by which others help answer: Did it work? Did it do what it should? Should it be done again (for a program or activity)? Should we continue to implement it (for a concept)? What ideas does it suggest for our future? How have we and the church grown in the process?
- ## Skills and Attributes Needed
- Openness.
  - Flexibility.
  - Creativity.
  - Understanding of the people involved.
  - Commitment to the mission of the group.
  - Patience.
  - Enthusiasm for your idea, without feeling that your entire being is wrapped up in it.
- ## Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness
- Take a survey of how you have introduced ideas in the past. Think

- about what was faithful and effective. What changes would you make?
- Try to discover your personal style of introducing an idea. Do you come across as sincere? Enthusiastic? Committed? Pushy? Easily discouraged? Does your interest fall as soon as others accept or reject the idea?
  - Practice reality testing. Decide what you think the acceptability of your idea will be and what the questions will be about it. Test your perceptions with others.
  - Observe how others successfully introduce ideas.

## Issues Facing the Church

- How do you deal effectively with people who are "idea people," those who dream up new programs, new concepts and new plans but who aren't very good at implementation?
- What is the relationship of power and authority to a person's ability to have an idea accepted? One way to think about it is to consider whether there are people in the church who can suggest almost anything and have it accepted, while others never are heard.
- Why are new ideas important? When can they get in the way?
- How can your congregation and its committees and boards increase its ability to hear new ideas without rushing to judgment?

## Questions

- What part of introducing an idea have you done well in the past?
- What is most difficult for you?
- What is one thing you can do the next time you want to introduce an idea that you've never done before?
- There are people whose attachment to church is closely bound with warm memories from the past and the formation of their faith. If they remain in the church of their childhood, they may have an interest in keeping things familiar, or have a high stake in any decisions that are made. If they are new to your church they may wish to change it to be more like another church which holds these memories for them. How can such people learn to balance the faith of their past with an uncertain future? How can you help to assure that your church is not sharply divided between those who value the past and those who look to a different future?